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A Re-examination of Luther's View on the State of the Dead

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Introduction

Luther's theology was forged in the crucible of his struggle to find forgiveness and peace from his overwhelming sense of guilt. He had an acute sense of misery and felt as if he hung in the balance between life and death. The German word that captures something of Luther's emotional state is *Anfechtung*—one feels cut off from God and hope is suffocated. “Anfechtung is the foretaste of the peril of death.”¹ It was not only the fear of death that terrorized him, but death itself was an ever-present reality for Luther. He lost two of his children in childhood, so by virtue of his experience, and his theology, he was forced to wrestle with the meaning of death and the after-life. It is not surprising then that Luther wrote much about death, some of it at times confusing and complicated.

Did Luther believe in soul sleep or in an immortal soul that survives death? There are generally two views concerning the state of the dead among Christians. The first view asserts that when a person dies, his soul survives death and continues to exist in some place. For those who are saved, they go straight into paradise. For those who are not so righteous, they go into some halfway house called purgatory (Catholic view) where they are purified and made ready for paradise. For those who are rebellious sinners they go straight to hell to suffer in the eternal flames, but never able

¹ Gerhard Sauter, “Luther and the Resurrection” in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 107.

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to die.² For most Protestants, there is no intermediate place; one goes to hell or heaven after death. The basic agreement here is that the righteous and sinful soul are both immortal.

On December 19th, 1513 at the Fifth Lateran Council, Pope Leo X issued a Bull (*Apostolici regimis*) declaring, "We do condemn and reprobate all who assert that the intelligent soul is mortal" (*Damnamus et reprobamus omnes assertenes animam intellectivam mortalem esse*). This was directed against the growing "heresy" of those who denied the natural immortality of the soul, and the avowed conditional immortality of man. The Bull also decreed that those who adhere to such erroneous assertions should be shunned and punished as heretics.³ This view further suggests that at the resurrection of the righteous, the body and the soul are reconnected and salvation is now complete in a glorified state. Catholic teaching explicitly affirms the immortality of the soul.

The alternate position, sometimes called soul sleep, asserts that the soul is not a separate entity from the body. The body is a soul. We are all living souls. At death there is no surviving entity called the soul. The soul is dead; it is not immortal. In other words, the soul is simply the person, not a part of the person. It does not and cannot survive death. The person in this state is totally unaware of anything; the Bible calls it a sleep. The soul is not in hell, heaven or purgatory because it doesn't exist. At the resurrection the person is raised again from the dead and becomes a living soul.⁴

Which of these two positions did Luther agree with? Did he agree with one as opposed to the other at a certain time in his life? Did he hold contradictory views? Did he take a middle position? These are the questions that will be explored in this article.

² Heinrich Denzinger, ed., *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: Herder, 1957), 181, 184, 193, 197, 199, 206, 237, 238.

³ Ibid., 237, 238.

⁴ Such concept was held in the time of Luther by English reformer William Tyndale who argued against Thomas Moore in favor of soul sleep. (See William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* [1530] (Cambridge: University Press, 1850), 180; See also Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: University Press, 1985), 119). In contemporary theology, the Seventh-day Adventists are the largest body of believers in soul sleep. This teaching is considered one of their fundamental teachings and marks one of major differences that they have with main line Protestantism. See chapter 26 at <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html>

In trying to get a better handle on Luther's teaching on this matter, I have categorized his views into two main areas: Firstly, where he writes definitely on death as a sleep, secondly, where he seems to be ambiguous or he seems to contradict his view of death as sleep.

Philip Secker's article on "Martin Luther's View on the State of the Dead," quotes an 18th century Anglican theologian called Francis Blackburne who asserted that Martin Luther "espoused the doctrine of the sleep of the soul, upon a scripture foundation, and then he made use of it as a confutation of purgatory and saint worship and continued in that belief to the last moment of his life."⁵

Blackburne's words were used as evidence by the noted Adventist historian Leroy Froom to support his views that Luther taught soul sleep. Speaking of the reformer he writes: "He stated many times that the Christian dead are unaware of anything for they see not, feel not, understand not. They are asleep oblivious to all passing events. More than one hundred times scattered over the years, Luther declared death to be a sleep and repeatedly asserted that in death there is total unconsciousness, and consequent unawareness of the passage of time."⁶ Froom further asserts: "He [Luther] presses the point that death is a sound sweet sleep and furthermore, the dead will remain asleep until the day of resurrection, which resurrection embraces both body and soul when both will be brought together again."⁷

Is this characterization of Luther's view of the state of the dead an accurate and balanced picture? Did Luther emphatically teach soul sleep? Was Luther's position an ambiguous one that finds support in both camps? Was Luther himself confused about his views and wrote contradictory statements? Did his views change over time as his theological position shifted from Catholicism to Protestantism?

⁵ Philip Secker, "Martin Luther's Views on the State of the Dead," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38, (July-August 1967): 422-435; Francis Blackburne, *A Short Historical View of the Controversy concerning an Intermediate State and the Separate Existence of the Soul between Death and the General Resurrection Deduced from the Beginning of the Protestant Reformation to the Present Time* (London: F. Field, 1765), 14.

⁶ Leroy Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers*, 3 vols (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965), 2: 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76, 77.

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Luther's understanding of death in his early years was fundamentally a late medieval Catholic view. Lohse asserts "Luther appropriated something from the dominant medieval view of death and judgment. . . ."⁸ What were some of these views prevalent at that time? For the people of late medieval and early modern Europe, death was a very frequent visitor. The average life expectancy was thirty years. One in four died in infancy, another twenty-five percent died before their first year, and twenty percent died before they reached the age of ten. A step-parent raised surviving children. One historian writes: "Marriages were dissolved by death as frequently as they are today by divorce. Remarriage was common and expected. In a world without modern medicine and drugs, reliable effective sanitation, diseases like influenza, small pox, typhoid and dysentery were regular and lethal callers, especially in urban areas."⁹ But nothing could be compared to the devastating Black plagues that swept across Europe from 1348 to the late 1660s carrying away millions to their graves. The impact of disease was exacerbated by wars and famines.

How did ordinary people cope with such unremitting tragedy? "If theology matters to ordinary people at any time, it must surely do so here, in the act of contemplating the fate of loved ones after their death or peering through the veil to catch a glimpse of one's own eternal destiny."¹⁰ The Catholic Church would provide the prescriptive advice for people facing the trauma of death and dying. The church offered at least three of its sacraments to men and women facing death. There was ritual anointing called "extreme unction" in which oil was placed on eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands and feet as a dedication of the senses to God. The other deathbed sacrament was a last confession of sins and the administration of communion, here called the "*Viaticum*" (literally that taken on a journey).¹¹

The event that would propel Martin Luther into historic prominence was his attempt to invite debate on the abuse of the doctrine of indulgences by the papal emissary Johan Tetzel on October 31, 1517. But indulgences

⁸ Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, translated and edited by Roy A. Harrisville, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 325, 326.

⁹ Peter Matheson, *Reformation Christianity Leaving The World*, Peter Marshall, *Peoples' History of Christianity*, 6 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 5: 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

cannot be understood without understanding purgatory. This was a scholastic doctrine invented by the medieval church to explain how God deals with those who are good but are not good enough to merit immediate entry into heaven. Catholicism taught that Christ's atonement on the cross (collectively) and the sacrament of baptism (individually) freed humans from "original" sin and made it possible to gain access to heaven. However, because of human's continuing propensity to commit "mortal sins," this created a further barrier. Fortunately the church on earth has delegated authority to forgive sins through the sacrament of penance.

The medieval authorities made a distinction between guilt attached to a mortal sin and the penalty or satisfaction that was still due to God even when the guilt was removed. The priest through penance could only remove a small fraction of that satisfaction due so that the remainder (along with the punishment for less serious or venial sins) would have to be paid off after death in purgatory. The time in this prison of purgatory would be measured in tens, hundreds, or thousands of years. So when the church began to issue indulgences (certificates remitting part or all of the satisfaction due for sin), they were expressed in terms of "days" and "years" equivalent to earthly penances so that the perception was that the experience of purgatory was a temporary one.¹² Indulgences were first made available to assist souls in purgatory by a papal bull of 1476.¹³

The medieval church also popularized the notion of the "communion of saints," the compelling idea that all Christian souls, whether saints in heaven, sinners on earth, or suffering in purgatory were inextricably linked

¹² Ibid., 174.

¹³ "Our aim is that the salvation of souls may be secured above all at that time when they most need the intercession of others and are last able to help themselves. We wish by our Apostolic authority to draw on the treasury of the Church and to succor the souls in purgatory who died united with Christ through love and whose lives have merited that such intercessions should now be offered through an indulgence of this kind. With the longings of such great paternal affection . . . we grant by concession and indulgence as follows: If any parents, friends or other Christians are moved by obligations of piety towards these very souls who are exposed to the fire of purgatory . . . let them during the stated period of ten years give a fixed amount or value of money, as laid down by its dean and chapter or by our own collector, for the repair of the church of Saints, paying either in person at the Church or by duly accredited messengers. . . ." (Pope Sixtus IV, *Salvator Noster* (1476), quoted in Rupp and Benjamin Drew, *Martin Luther*, Documents of Modern History (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), 14.

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to each other and that the living had the ability and duty to ease the suffering of the dead.¹⁴ Consequently, a living person could alleviate the suffering of their dead relatives by paying an indulgence fee.¹⁵

The immediate cause of Luther's stand on soul sleep was the issue of purgatory, with its focus on the conscious sufferings of anguished souls. In his famous 95 theses, which he posted at the church door at Wittenberg, Luther addresses purgatory from the viewpoint of a believing Catholic.

Martin Luther's first essay, *Die Sieben Puszpsalm* appeared in the spring of 1517, and according to Heinz Bluhm was met with instantaneous success.¹⁶ Martin Luther would go on to be one of the most read and beloved German writers. Some even consider him to be the greatest master of the German language.¹⁷ His 95 theses would capture the imagination of the German people and spark the flame of the Reformation.

Luther's Early View on Death

According to Althaus, one of the earliest pictures we get of Luther's early views on death was a sermon he preached on Preparing to Die (*sermon von de Bereitung Zum Sterben* in 1519). He describes death as "a narrow gate and the small way to life," corresponding to the narrow exit through which a child is born into this world from the body of his mother. Thus when a man dies, he passes through the narrows and straits of anxieties to be born into the world to come.

Luther considered that in death a "dying man must courageously enter into anxiety with the knowledge that there will be great space and much joy

¹⁴ Matheson, 175.

¹⁵ The most famous indulgence preacher of the Late Mediaeval period was the infamous Johan Tetzel who went about Saxony Germany preaching the indulgence message while raising funds to repair Saint Peter's Cathedral. Luther's 95 theses was a response to what Luther saw as a blatant abuse and exploitation of the indulgence doctrine by this flamboyant and charismatic cleric. In one of his most famous line, it is alleged that Tetzel boasted that the moment the coin hits the bottom of the collection plate the soul raises from purgatory. (Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2009], 71).

¹⁶ Heinz Blum, "Luther's View of Man in His Early German Writings," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34 (October 1963): 583.

¹⁷ Ibid.

afterwards.”¹⁸ This dying in faith sees it in the light of the gospel. The voice of the law says, “In the midst of life we are in death.” The voice of the gospel says, “in the midst of death we are in life.”¹⁹ Thus, in his earliest days as a reformer, Luther still shows his dependency to the Catholic understanding of life after death. Luther is recorded to speak in favor of prayer for the dead as late as 1521.²⁰

Moving Away from the Catholic View of Death

Until the end of his life, Luther believed in a dualistic view of human nature. The belief that at death the soul separates from the body was characteristic of all magisterial reformers and Luther wasn’t an exception.²¹ The difference between Luther and other reformers was in his assertion that the separation of body and soul results in death being a “sleep” in which the body perishes in dust and the soul enters a “sweet sleep” where it doesn’t “feel nor see anything.” With some variations, Luther consistently held this position until the day of his death. In a sermon preached a year before his passing away, Luther asserted:

... we should learn to view our death in the right light, so that we need not become alarmed on account of it, as unbelief does; because in Christ it is

¹⁸ *Martin Luther's Werke*, 56 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1884) 2: 685 translated in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1966), 408. [Hereafter this work will be cited as WA, followed by the volume, page and line number.]

¹⁹ *Luther's Works*, gen eds. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols (St. Louis: Concordia: 1958), 13: 83; See also *Luther's Works*, 53: 275. [Hereafter this work will be cited as LW followed by the volume and page number.]

²⁰ *Sermon* [first printed ed.] (1520) WA 6, 372: 4-10; see Secker, 433.

²¹ Luther's view of death was firmly embedded in classic division between body and soul. In one of his last sermons before his death Luther explains this division in these words: “. . . it is not difficult for Christ, in the hour when body and soul are separated, to hold in his hand the soul and spirit of man, even though we ourselves neither feel nor see anything, yea, even though the body be entirely consumed. For, since he can preserve the breath of life and spirit, apart from other body, so he can again bring the body together out of dust and ashes. This he has proved in this and similar examples, when he restored to life with one work those who had truly died and whose body and soul had been separated. Hence we must conclude that he holds in his hand the life of those who have died; for if this power did not belong to him, he could not restore life.” “On Matthew 9: 16-25” [1544] in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker, 8 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 5: 358.

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indeed not death, but a *fine, sweet and brief sleep*, which brings us release from this vale of tears, from sin and from the fear and extremity of real death and from all the misfortunes of this life, and we shall be secure and without care, rest sweetly and gently for a brief moment, as on a sofa, until the time when he shall call and awaken us together with all his dear children to his eternal glory and joy. For since we call it a sleep, we know that we shall not remain in it, but be asleep. Hence, we shall censure ourselves that we were surprised or alarmed at such a sleep in the hour of death, and suddenly come alive out of the grave and from decomposition, and entirely well, fresh, with a pure, clear, glorified life, meet our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the clouds.²²

For Luther, those who died in Christ experienced a sweet unconscious sleep after which comes an awakening at the resurrection day. Death is a rest from all of life's cares. It seems that around 1521/22, Luther started to change his catholic view of "soul-awareness" into a position that can be described as "soul-sleep." In a letter written on January 13, 1522 to Nicholas von Amsdorf, Luther wrote:

I am inclined to agree with your opinion that the souls of the just are *asleep* and that *they do not know where they are* up to the Day of Judgment. . . But I do not dare to affirm that this is true for *all souls* in general. . . who knows how God deals with the separated souls? Can he just as well make them sleep on and off or for as long as He wished. . . ? I think the same about those condemned; some may feel punishments immediately after death, but others may be spared until that Day. . . *therefore it is my opinion that these things are uncertain.* It is most probable, however, that with the few exceptions, *all of the departed sleep without possessing any capacity of feeling.*²³

In this letter, Luther shows that he is not absolutely dogmatic about the nature of death. He confesses to Amsdorf, "these things are uncertain." However, he ventures in opining that "with the few exceptions, all of the departed sleep without possessing any capacity of feeling." Luther further explains who these "few exceptions" are:

²² Ibid., 359, emphasis added.

²³ "Letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf" (1522) in *WA*, BR 2: 422, 4-6, 10-25; Translation in *LW*, 48: 360-361 with a few changes made by Secker, 428.

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I am inclined to agree with your opinion that the souls of the just are asleep. . . . But I do not dare to affirm that this is true for all souls in general, because of the taking up of Paul, of Elijah, and of Moses (who certainly did not appear as phantoms on Mount Tabor). . . . And that passage in Luke 16 about Abraham and Lazarus—although it does not attribute sensation to all of the departed, yet it does attribute sensation to Abraham and Lazarus. . . .²⁴

Thus, although the majority of the souls are in an unconscious sleep where there is no “sensation,” for Luther, the examples of Elijah, Moses, Paul and Abraham, prove that some exceptional souls are indeed aware of their surroundings, even though in general the souls are said to sleep.

It is uncertain whether Luther counted the damned souls among the “exceptions” from the unconscious soul-sleep. On a number of occasions, Luther confessed that he was not particularly certain what happens with the wicked after their death.²⁵ In the above quoted letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf Luther asks his colleague if he can explain to him who are the spirits in prison to whom Christ preached? Luther wondered, “were they not able to sleep in Him until the Last day?” In a Sermon preached in 1522 Luther said that the rich man of Luke 16 suffered “in his conscience” after his death and “had no rest”²⁶ while in 1525 Luther asserted that “the damned fall asleep against and not through Christ” whatever that might mean.²⁷

Through the correspondence with Amsdorf we can see that Luther accepted the biblical notion of soul sleep while at the same time trying to harmonize this idea with biblical texts that seem to suggest otherwise. In the years between 1522 and 1532, Luther is recorded affirming the belief

²⁴ Ibid. According to the Bible Moses’ body was resurrected (Jude 1, Matthew 17: 1-9) and Elijah’s body was taken in heaven without seeing death. It seems that the reformer thought that only their souls were taken to heaven and not their bodies.

²⁵ *Sermon* (1522) WA 10, part III, 194: 17-19; *Sermon* [printed ed.] (1523) WA 11, 127-131; *Commentary on Genesis* on 25: 7-10 (1540) WA 43, 361: 30-36, see also LW 4, 314-316, 362, 363; *Commentary on Genesis* on 42: 38 (1544) WA 44, 517: 31-36, see also LW 7: 294.

²⁶ *Sermon* [Luther’s ed.] (1522) WA 10, Part III, 192: 12-18, 28-29; *Sermon* [Rörer’s hand notes] (1523) WA 11, 130: 13-17.

²⁷ Unbelievers “entschlaffen nicht durch, sondern, wieder Jesus und sind verdampft”(Wittenberg edition [1539] of a sermons preached in 1525 WA 17, Part I, 211: 36.)

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that the “dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). In 1523 Luther said that the “dead do not experience time, hours, days or years.”²⁸ In 1524 Luther said that the “dead know nothing.”²⁹ In 1525 he stated that the dead “do not praise God.”³⁰ In his sermon at the funeral of prince Frederick II, Luther concluded: “Frederick rests and is quiet. Those who acknowledged Christ here on earth are now sleeping. Do not worry if [whether or not] Frederick also suffers pains and grieves as you do, for he rests and is quiet.”³¹

Further, in 1526 he said about the righteous “I think they are in such a sleep that they *neither feel nor see anything*.” In 1532, Luther is recorded as saying: “the sleep is so deep that the dead *do not even dream*.”³² It seems that Luther was quite positive that the righteous dead, at least most of them, are completely oblivious, they don’t feel, see, or know anything, and finally they do not even dream but abide in complete unconsciousness.³³

Luther’s Ambiguous Statements

If these statements were the only ones Luther ever made on the state of the dead, we could agree with Fromm and other conditionalists that Luther was an ardent supporter of soul-sleep (for the majority of the souls at least). However, the Great Reformer also made some ambiguous and even plainly contradictory statements in the later years of his career. The majority of his ambiguous statements stem from his Lectures on Genesis, which Luther started writing in 1535 and ended in 1545. In it, he asserted several times that dead souls are not unconscious. The most pertinent quote, which

²⁸ *Sermon* [Luther’s ed.] (1523) *WA* 10: Part III, 194: 17; He said this repeatedly see *Sermon* [Rörer post notes] (1523) *WA* 11, 130: 25-29. *Annotations on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (1532) *WA* 20, 162: 27-163.

²⁹ *Sermon* [printed ed.] (1524) *WA* 14, 70: 14-19; See also *Tabletalk*, Anton Lauterbachs (1538) *WA* TR 3, No 3904, 697: 3-7.

³⁰ *Die Sieben Busspsalmen* (1525tae) *WA* 18, 482: 4-7; *Seven Penitential Psalms* in *LW* 14: 143.

³¹ *Sermon* (1525) *WA* 17, Part I: 203, 13-17.

³² *Der Prophet Jona ausgelegt* (1526), *WA* 19, 221: 24-28. Emphasis added; *Sermon* [Rörer’s notes] (1532) *WA* 36, 252: 8-9 in *LW* 51: 241-242. See also a letter to Luther’s father in 1530 *WA* BR 5 240: 64-70 and *Annotations on Ecclesiastes* (1532) *WA* 20, 162: 27-163.

³³ I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my graduate assistant Dojcin Zivadinovic for much of this section.

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belongs to the category of contradictory statements, can be found in his comments on the passage in chapter 25, 7-10.

... there is a difference between the sleep or rest of this life and that of the future life. For toward night a person who has become exhausted by his daily labor in this life enters into his chamber in peace, as it were, to sleep there; and during this night he enjoys rest and has no knowledge whatever of any evil caused either by fire or by murder. But the soul does not sleep in the same manner. It is awake. It experiences visions and the discourses of the angels and of God.³⁴

At first glance, this statement completely conflicts with his previous statements he made between 1522 and 1532. However, it must be noted that in the following verse, Luther defends his statement by mentioning the examples of Elijah and Moses as proof for his assertion.

... But after death, soul enters into its bedroom and rests in peace. There it sleeps without knowing that it is asleep, and yet it still serves God with awaken soul. Thus, God is able to wake up Moses and Elijah, etc. and in such way he can control [them] that they may become alive. But how can that be? We do not know enough about bodily sleep and how God affirms that this [state] is a sleep, quiet and peaceful.³⁵

Thus, the question arises whether Luther is here again speaking only of those “few, exceptional ones” whom God chose to keep awake and experience visions and discourses with angels and God or is it the case with all souls?

In the next chapter of his lecture, Luther adds the argument of Abraham in Luke 16 as another proof of a soul being asleep but at the same time ready for God to awaken it at any time. “These things must be carefully noted: because it is divine truth that Abraham lives, serves and reigns with God. But what sort of life that is, whether he is asleep or awake, that is another question. How the soul rests, we are not to know.”³⁶

³⁴ “...Anima autem non sic dormit, sed vigilat, et patitur visiones, loquelas Angelorum et Dei...” (*Lectures on Genesis* on 25: 7-10, *WA*, 43: 360, 24-33; *LW*, 4: 313).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Commentary on Genesis* 26: 24-25 (1540) in *WA* 43: 480, 11-15.

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After a careful reading of this text, it seems that Luther is attempting to bring into line biblical texts that affirm the “soul-sleep” and biblical texts that seem to affirm the conscious activities of souls like Moses, Elijah and Abraham. In trying to harmonize the two ideas, Luther comes to the ambiguous conclusion that souls who are asleep are at the same time available for God to be “awakened” even before the judgment. It is in this light that we need to understand this and many others comments of Luther’s (especially in the Lectures on Genesis), where he affirms that “God talks with the dead. . . .”³⁷ The dead can “hear,” “think,” and “see, although we do not know how”³⁸ “God opens the eyes of the dead. . . .”³⁹ They see with “spiritual eyes after death, etc.”⁴⁰

Luther’s Contradictory Statements

Nearing the last years of his life, Luther was recorded as making statements which would seem to indicate that all the souls (not just the few exceptions) are completely awake, conscious and rejoicing in heaven. Incidentally, such statements were frequently recorded during the funeral speeches in which Luther presided. For example, in 1542 Luther wrote to Justus Jonas: “After mourning for a season, we shall enter into joy unspeakable, where your Cathy and my Magdalene, together with many others, have preceded us and daily call, admonish, and beckon us to follow.”⁴¹

In the same year Luther wrote about the deceased Urbanus Rhegius: “We know that he is blessed and has life and eternal joy in fellowship with Christ and the heavenly church, in which he now personally learns, sees, and hears of those things which he proclaimed here in the church in

³⁷ “. . . loquitur Deus cum mortuis non aliter.” *Commentary on Genesis* on 26: 24-25 (1540), *WA* 43: 481, 24-25; Secker, 432.

³⁸ “Es ist war: Animae audiunt, sentient, vident post mortem, aber wie es zugeheit, vorsthen wir nicht.” *Tabletalk* [Heidenreich], (1542/43), *WA* TR 5, No 5534: 219, 3-8; See also *LW* 1: 287.

³⁹ “*Quando aliquis Sanctus mor[itur], dues aperit amb[o] oc[ulos].*” Sermon [Rörer’s notes], (1532), *WA*, 36: 260, 6 (30 of the printed ed.); *LW*, 51: 247.

⁴⁰ “. . . oculos spirituals, quibus credentes in Christum videant, cum per mortem isti corporis oculi clausi, el potius prorsus extincti sunt.” *Commentary on Genesis*, on 15: 1 (1537/38), *WA* 42: 556, 8-10; *LW*, 3: 11.

⁴¹ “Letter to Justus Jonas,” (1542), *WA BR* 10, No 3829, 227, 27 – 30; Translation from LCC 18, 76.

accordance with the Word of God.”⁴² In 1544 when George Hoessel’s son died, Luther consoled the bereaved father with these words: “. . . you must have no doubt that your son is rejoicing with our Savior, Christ, and with all the saints [er sei bei unserm Heiland Christo und bei allen Seligen in Freuden].”⁴³

How may one reconcile these statements with his earlier views on unconscious soul sleep? Did Luther simply change his views before the end of his life? Is it possible to understand these funeral speeches as merely emphatic statements not reflecting all the theological finesses of Luther’s beliefs? These questions remain for perhaps another study.

Many quotes from Luther point to the fact that his mind struggled with the idea of the soul being dead but still alive through the mysterious soul-sleep phenomenon. In a sermon we quoted already earlier in the present paper, written around the 1542, Luther argues that from God’s point of view, death is not death but life, because God is not the God of the dead but of those alive. However, Luther asks, “how can people be in the same time alive while dead and not breathing?” The Bible answers that they sleep, says Luther. He states:

. . . death in Christ is nothing more than mere sleep. . . How can a person be said to sleep when he no longer has either breath or life, is buried underground and is in the process of decomposition? . . . Christ says that to him the dying of a person is not death, but a sleep, yea, from his point of view none of those who have lived and died before our time are dead, but are all alive, as those we see standing before us; for he has concluded that all shall live, yea he hold their lives in their hands.⁴⁴

Soul-Sleep or Immortal Soul-Sleep?

Even if we take into consideration that the great majority of Luther’s clearest statements definitely point toward a doctrine of soul sleep, we must confess that Luther’s souls, although sleeping are still immortal. Luther is

⁴² Preface to *Urbanus Rhegius, Prophetiae veteris testamenti de Christo*, (1542), *WA* 53: 400, 17 – 19.

⁴³ “Letter to George Hösel” (1544), *WA BR* 10: 699, 9-13; See also *Library of Christian Classics* 26 vols. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1953-1966), 18: 79. Henceforth, this work will be referred to as *LCC* followed by the volume and page number.

⁴⁴ *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker, 8 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2000), 5: 357, 358.

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not a conditionalist. For Luther, souls are immortal. The souls of the righteous sleep before God and await resurrection (with a few souls already being awakened) while the damned souls lay in darkness in a sleep away from God.

Bernard Lohse confidently asserts that Luther held to the immortality of the soul.⁴⁵ For Lohse, Luther's argument is strictly theological. Quoting from Luther: "God creates the soul immortal in the womb."⁴⁶ Again quoting from Luther, he continues: "He speaks with man alone. Accordingly, where and with whomever God speaks, whether in anger or in grace that person is surely immortal. The Person of God, who speaks, and the Word point out that we are the kind of creatures with whom God would want to speak eternally and in an immortal manner."⁴⁷ Lohse continues quoting from Luther: "those who believe in him acknowledge him from whom they have their being never die. Their natural life will be stretched out into eternal life, so that they never taste death. . . ." He then goes on to quote John 8:51 "If anyone keeps my word he will never see death." Lohse further quotes Luther: "when we are dead, we are not dead to [God]. For he is not a God of the dead but the God of Abraham etc., who lives as it is said in Matthew 22 [v32] they are not dead but live to me."⁴⁸

Although these quotes clearly talk about the immortality of the soul, none of them disapproves soul sleep. In these quotes Luther was not addressing the issue of the state of the dead. He was affirming the reality of Jesus' words that death has no power over those who believe in the gospel.

Conclusion

As late as 1542, writing for a funeral service, Luther penned these words:

⁴⁵ Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 326; The author suggests that the evidence for this has been furnished by Werner Thiede, "Nur ein ewiger Augenblick: Luthers Lehre vom Seelenschlaf zwischen Tod und Auferweckung," *Luther* 64 (1993) 112-25.

⁴⁶ *WA* 39: 11, 401 quoted in Lohse, 327.

⁴⁷ *LW*, 5: 76 in Lohse, 327.

⁴⁸ *LW*, 52: 55 quoted in Lohse, 326, 327.

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But we Christians. . . should train and accustom ourselves in faith to despise death and regard it as a deep, strong, sweet sleep; to consider the coffin as nothing other than our Lord Jesus' bosom or Paradise, the grave as nothing other than a soft couch of ease or rest. As verily, before God, it truly is just this; for he testifies, John 11:21; Lazarus, our friend sleeps; Matthew 9:24: The maiden is not dead, she sleeps. Thus, too, St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, removes from sight all hateful aspects of death as related to our mortal body and brings forward nothing but charming and joyful aspects of the promised life. He says there [vv. 42ff]: It is sown in corruption and will rise in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor (that is, a hateful, shameful form) and will rise in glory; it is sown in weakness and will rise in strength; it is sown in a natural body and will rise a spiritual body.⁴⁹

All throughout his life, Luther consistently utilized the biblical metaphor of sleep to describe death. He called it "a deep, strong, sweet sleep." This is no ordinary sleep by virtue of the adjectives used to describe the kind of sleep—it is "deep," "strong" and "sweet." Luther often affirmed that the departed sleep without possessing any capacity of feeling, (See the letter to Nicolas von Amsdorf) and the dead soul has no consciousness, no sense of awareness, etc.

Philip Secker suggested that more than 100 times Luther declared death to be a sleep and repeatedly asserted that in death there is total unconsciousness and no awareness of the passage of time.⁵⁰ The Lutheran scholar D. T. A. Kantonen referred to Luther's view of death in these words.

Luther, with a greater emphasis on the resurrection, preferred to concentrate on the scriptural metaphor of sleep. For just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpectedly when he awakes, without knowing what happened to him, "we shall suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death." We shall sleep, until he comes and knocks on the little grave and says; "Doctor Martin get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be with him forever!"⁵¹

⁴⁹ "Christian Song Latin and German, for Use at Funerals," (1542), in *Works of Martin Luther*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1915-1932), 6: 287, 288.

⁵⁰ Philip J. Secker, "Martin Luther's Views on the State of the Dead," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38, (July-August 1967): 422-435.

⁵¹ D. T. A. Kantonen, *The Christian Hope* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1954); For Luther's reference see *WA* 37: 151.

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Paul Althaus, one of the most brilliant interpreters of Luther's theology, focuses primarily on Luther's theology of death and the resurrection rather than trying to explain Luther's view on the state of the dead. He asserts that Luther answers the question of where are we in death by referring to the word of God. For Luther, the Word declares that Christians rest in the bosom of Christ.⁵² What does Luther mean by this? Are Christians literally in heaven with Christ or does Christ preserve the identity of Christians until the resurrection? Luther's bold revolutionary statement that the "dead know nothing" stands in sharp contrast to the traditional teaching of his day where Christian souls were placed in some intermediate state between paradise and hell. For Luther, all who die in faith have their place in God's word and Christ's promise. They "rest" and "sleep" in the bosom of Christ.⁵³

Althaus shares our conclusion that although Luther held onto a Hellenistic dualistic definition of death as the separation of soul and body, the Reformer's thinking however is dominated by the New Testament insights on death—which is understood to be a "deep and dreamless sleep without consciousness and feeling." In Luther's words: "For just as a man who falls asleep and sleeps soundly until morning does not know what has happened to him when he wakes up, so we shall suddenly rise in the last day and we shall know neither what death has been like or how we have come through it."⁵⁴

Althaus is forced to acknowledge Luther's apparent inconsistency; for in trying to explain some difficult biblical passages, Luther suggest souls can "experience visions and hearing God and the angels speak."⁵⁵ This flatly contradicts his other statements on the unconsciousness of the dead. Again we are compelled to ask: "Which is it Luther, are the souls unconscious at death or conscious, are they in heaven or are they in the grave?" Did Luther, in his older years, yielding to the pressure of other reformers, try to avoid the concept of unconsciousness emphasizing more the "living" aspect of the soul-sleep? Was Luther trying to not sound like some Anabaptist scholars of his time who were also strong on the soul

⁵² Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 412. *WA* 43: 361, *LW* 4: 313.

⁵³ Althaus, 412, 413.

⁵⁴ Althaus, 414; *WA* 17: 11, 235.

⁵⁵ *WA*, 43: 360, 24-33; *LW*, 4: 313, quoted on page 12.

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sleep? These questions unfortunately exceed the scope of this paper and call for more study to be done in this area.

How can we then explain Luther's apparent conflict on the state of the dead? One scholar proposes a possible reason for this. He stated that Luther "was reluctant to speak of the total death of a person when at the same time strongly believing in the certainty of this persons being awakened by the voice of God at the last days."⁵⁶

No one who studies Luther finds him easy to understand. As one of the most original and provocative theological thinkers, he is impossible to be labeled. He defines simplistic explanations and it should come as no surprise that his view on the state of the dead should be problematic.

There is no question that Luther wanted to remain faithful to the biblical record and it is clear from the New Testament that its focus was never on the dead and what they may be doing or not doing. The New Testament emphasizes Christ's triumph over death and sin. The focus is on the certainty of the resurrection for the saints because of Christ's own resurrection. So Luther's essential focus is on the resurrection power over death, for now death holds no power over the believer and it is never the last word. The believer can therefore live without fear of death or the grave, for both have been conquered in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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⁵⁶ Winfred Vogel, "The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther, Part 1: Luther's Basic Concepts," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Autumn 1980 vol. 24. No. 3: 239-246.